

SENIOR ESSAY

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE BLACK  
POWER MOVEMENT

By

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to point up some of the theological implications of the growing concept of "Black Power." It deals with the ideas inherent in the Black Power struggle, that Black people, particularly Black Churchmen, have been chosen by God to lead Black people to freedom from the oppression of White America, and to lead the Nation to a concern for justice and democracy for all.

There is the necessity to try and give some meaning or definition to the term "Black Power" before attempting to relate it to theology. The writer chooses not to think in terms of a "Black Theology." The idea of a theology for Black people is preferred. It is, however, a theology which is inclusive, rather than exclusive and which is reconciling rather than alienating.

Writing as a Christian Minister, the writer of the paper relates some achievements and failures of the Church in the "Black Power" movement. He attempts to state what he believes to be the Church's attitude toward the problems involved in the implication that God has chosen Black people to be deliverers from the present American situation.

## THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT

### Ambiguity Of The Term "Black Power"

Since Black Power means different things to different people and, is essentially empirical in the sense of self-determination for Black people, it can mean different things to the same person on differing occasions. It is impossible to attribute its ultimate meaning to any single individual or organization.

It was in 1966 when the term "Black Power" was shouted across American television screens by Stokely Carmichael. Greenwood, Mississippi turned out to be the arena for the birth of the Black Power slogan in the civil rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had suggested the use of the slogan "Black Consciousness" or "Black Equality." Stokely Carmichael insisted that neither slogan would have ready appeal and persuasive force as the term "Black Power'" So Black Power is now a part of the nomenclature of our nation. To some it is adherent, to others it is dynamic; to some it is destructive, to others it is useful.

The term "Black Power" was immediately embraced by SNCC and CORE but was shunned by the NAACP and the Urban League. After two years of thought, discussion, and disunity, no meaning fully acceptable to all had been agreed upon. There were indications of a growing awareness of an urgent need for a greater degree of unity. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP sought grounds for unity between the different organizations. However, in doing so he rejected any concept that would call for a separate nation. Whitney Young of the Urban



League asserted that "the Urban League believes strongly in the interpretation of Black Power as a way of emphasizing self-determination, pride, self-respect, participation, and control of one's destiny and community affairs."<sup>1</sup>

Black Power is a cry of disappointment, anger and aspiration, but also of judgement and hope. It is a cry of daily hurt and persistent pain. It is a call to Black people to amass the political and economic strength to achieve their legitimate goals. It is a call for the pooling of black financial resources to achieve economic security. It is a psychological call to manhood. For years the Negro has been taught that he is a nobody, that his being has been stamped with an indelible imprint of inferiority, and that his whole history has been soiled with the feeling of worthlessness.

Black Power symbolizes unity and a newly found pride in the blackness with which the Creator endowed Black people and it becomes a mark of identification for them. The growing popularity of this viewpoint is evidenced by the appearance of natural hair styles among Negro youth and the surge of interest in African and Negro culture and history.<sup>2</sup>

Sidney Poitier, the celebrated Negro actor, gave his own definition of Black Power in an interview reported in the "Atlanta Voice" Newspaper:

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<sup>1</sup>Bryan Fuls, Black Struggle, (New York, 1969), pp. 313-314.

<sup>2</sup>Fred Powledge, Black Power: White Resistance, (Cleveland, 1967), pp. 210.

Certainly Black Power is just as much an expression of one's heritage, he began, as were any of the aggressive and constructive activities that came about on the part of the Irish immigrants years ago or the Italian immigrants. Black Power is similarly an expression of a people who are trying to find their place in the sun. I think, however, that unfortunately in the beginning there were negative connotations applied to the term Black Power because we in America are subject to sensationalism. Black people are trying to establish a sense of themselves and the rest of the country.<sup>3</sup>

James H. Cone, in his book, Black Theology and Black Power, defines Black Power as complete emancipation of Black people from white oppression by whatever means Black people deems necessary. The methods might include selective buying, marching, boycotting, or if necessary, rebellion. Cone insists that it means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein Black people no longer view themselves as without dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to shape their own destiny.

Black Power is being able to say No to intolerable conditions, and Yes to that something within which is worthwhile and needs to be taken into consideration. It is the power of the Black man to say Yes to his own black being and to make others accept him or be prepared for a struggle.<sup>4</sup>

When some Black folks talk about Black Power, they are concerned about setting up a separate state or black nation within the American commonwealth. When others talk about Black Power, they mean adequate power to tear down the present American system and

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<sup>3</sup>"Black Power Nothing New," The Atlanta Voice, January 5, 1969, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>James H. Cone, Black Theology & Black Power, (New York, 1969), pp. 6-7.

rebuild it on a more healthy foundation. There are still others who mean by Black Power a method of helping Black Americans deal with the problems of their identity.<sup>5</sup>

A true definition of Black Power creatively used is "democratic power." Black is the most appropriate term to express the accumulation and employment of power among people of color because race has been the means by which they were disinherited. In order to overcome their sense of inferiority and self-hatred, blackness must be the conscious means of emancipation. Black Power creatively employed brings freedom for enslaved Afro-Americans. Therefore, it is an expression of democratic power.<sup>6</sup>

#### Black Power And Black Theology

There is today a strong tendency to relate God to the Black man's struggle. There is also the attempt to relate his color to the oppressed. Many people want to accept the idea that God is totally black. Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr., sees Jesus as a black man in his book, *The Black Messiah*. According to Cleage, Jesus' Messiahship is concerned with the Business of ministering to Black people. His mission is liberation, political, social, and economic. It is Black Power Christianity and it is to be active now. Cleage further states that:

We no longer feel helpless as Black People. We do not feel that we must sit and wait for God

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<sup>5</sup>William L. Eichelberger, Reality In Black And White, (Philadelphia, 1969), p. 73.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

to intervene and settle our problems for us. We waited for four hundred years and he didn't do much of anything, so for the next four hundred years we're going to be fighting to change conditions for ourselves. This is merely a new theological position. Now we know that God is going to give us strength for our struggle. As God's chosen people God is fighting with us as we fight.<sup>7</sup>

Vincent Harding in his article entitled, "The Gift Of Blackness," views the black man in a particular role with a universal mission. He thinks of blackness as a gift that will fit black people for the revolution which will either save this nation or destroy it for all. "The deepest element of the gift of blackness is compassion," he says. Black people are the rejected ones, the humiliated ones, the spit-upon ones of America. Their experience makes it possible to have some sense of knowing what it means to be among the outcasts of the world, and this knowledge might well be the key to survival in today's world. Blacks live among the leaders of the arrogant white West. They have been 'buked and scorned' and their experience may have been for the world.<sup>8</sup>

Whites have been excluded from the Black Power Movement because Black People came to feel that Whites, ~~matter not~~ <sup>matter not</sup> what their attitude, could not do for the black man what he alone needed to do for himself. While there were Whites who meant well, their very presence was felt to be a deterrent to the Black Power struggle. God wanted blacks to lead the liberation movement.

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<sup>7</sup>Albert B. Cleage, Jr., The Black Messiah, (New York, 1969), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>Vincent Harding, "The Gift of Blackness" The Committee of Southern Churchmen, Inc., ed. Department of Publication Services, (1967)

Julius Lester, SNCC worker of the summer of 1964 in Mississippi, put it this way:

Whites, no matter how well meaning, could not relate to the Negro Community. A Negro would follow a white person to the Courthouse, not because he'd been convinced he should register to vote, but simply because he had been trained to say yes to whatever a white person wanted.<sup>9</sup>

Because of this view and others which are similar, many conclusions have been reached which suggests separation. If liberation is to come, God wants it to come from Black people, so say Black Power advocates. It is somewhat easier to understand some of the conclusions of Black Power if one accepts this kind of logic. Otherwise there is danger of paternalism and yet the question of basic trust: how far can the black man trust the white man to act in good faith?

A theology of Black People had its beginning long before there was a "Black Power" movement. Actually it had its beginning in the invisible church during the period of slavery. It is indeed an empirical theology that deals with the human experiences of blacks from the time they were brought to this country until now. What God has meant to Black People can be observed in all of their pilgrimage in this country.

Since religion is a response to God, or some kind of God, theology is an interpretation of that response. All theologies arise out of communal experience with God. A theology of Black People is the product of black Christian experience and reflection. It is a kind of experience that has been strong in the past, it is strong now.

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<sup>9</sup>Julius Lester, "The Angry Children of Malcolm X," Sing Out, Vol. 16, No. 5.

and could be redemptive for the future, provided that Black people do not get hung up on color to the extent that blackness itself becomes an end rather than a means.

Since the problems of self-identity are basically theological, we cannot escape the all important questions of Personhood or Being. What kind of self-identity does Black Power call a black to become? Is it enough to just accept one's 'Blackness'? Is it possible to achieve real self-identity apart from the total of life's context? When Black Power says "Black is beautiful" there is no doubt an implication or a restatement of the biblical doctrine of man. "God looked at his creation and behold it was very beautiful." Each part was beautiful in its own terms. There was no exclusive standard of beauty to which the rest should bow down to in a debasing way. Each people must affirm their own particular integrity in affirming the beauty of the whole. Let us keep in mind the fact that man who was made beautiful, can make himself ugly through sin. The cry "Black is beautiful" is also a cry for redemption, a cry for the restoration of one's natural integrity against the low estate into which one has fallen.

There is a group of Blacks whose concept of "Black Theology" does not think of Whites as God's children and show no concern for them. Some members of the group express this lack of concern either in hate, or in the loss of hope in getting any real assistance from the white community in the black man's fight for freedom. The validity of this kind of theology must be questioned when it practices a reverse form of racism that has all too long been carried on in white

Christianity to assure their members that this separation and superiority of the white race over the black race expresses the will of God.

A theology for Black people is very much necessary but it does not have to be reached in bitterness and resentment of Black and White, lower class against middle class, etc. It can be reconciling rather than alienating, catholic rather than racist, which will be a renewed way of proclaiming the heart of the gospel itself.

In his best selling book, Soul On Ice, Eldridge Cleaver tells how he came to an existential realization of his own de-humanization of self. He had raped a white woman as an act of rebellion against white society. He confessed later that he had gone astray, not so much from the white man's law, as from being human, civilized; for he really did not approve of the act of rape. He realized that the woman he had raped had not been actively involved in oppressing him or any other black people. He had taken revenge on whites through this woman for what the whole system was responsible for. He felt that he had become less than human, and that the price of hating other human beings is loving himself less.<sup>10</sup>

As in depth development of a theology for Black people would illustrate the many ways that people oppress each other, even pretend reconciliation when they are actually reasserting oppression in a new form. Black people understand, perhaps as no other people, how this oppressor-oppressed relationship works. On the other hand, when communication is restored and men find themselves recognizing

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<sup>10</sup>Eldridge Cleaver, Soul On Ice, (New York, 1968), pp. 16-17.

each other as brothers, they must acknowledge that this event is something that goes beyond their powers. It is a gift from beyond a black or white situation that you cannot prove or justify. It is a kind of unexpected grace that gives those who are alienated from each other a new basis upon which to conduct the struggle.

This could very well be a central theme for a theology of Black people. From the black experience one can see concretely the meaning of sin as alienation, and redemption as restored community through grace. After all, isn't this the real meaning of the Church as the body of Christ? The Black Church in its involvement with the Black Power movement must continually remind itself that the gospel is not concerned with only one people and one culture, but is concerned with people in all cultures. If the gospel is presented to Black people in the form of a Black Messiah, it should not be in an exclusive or racist sense. But it should be in the sense of a historical context that leaves open to every people a salvation that encounters their situation.

There is also a theology of revolution within the context of the "Black Power" movement which calls for a radical renovation of society. It brings judgment upon a white system based on false principles and demands that it be overthrown and that a new world be re-created based on entirely different principles, a world in which men can live in wholeness and brotherhood. Such a theology expresses the longing of biblical hope for historical salvation. Within the framework of the revolution, the gospel calls for the radical conversion of man in society and history. It points to man's sin, not



merely individually, but historically and collectively.

Within the theology of Black Power there is the hope for the coming of the Kingdom of God; the hope for a new man in a new world, where the oppressive structures of the present system have been revolutionized and a new era of peace, goodness and truth dawned. This is apocalyptic vision but it is nothing new to the black experience. It has always been central to black hopes. It is the heart of black preaching and black music. We can observe this apocalyptic view in one of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermons:

Our eternal message of hope is that dawn will come. Our slave foreparents realized this. They were never unmindful of the fact of midnight. When they thought of the agonizing darkness of midnight, they sang: 'I'm so glad trouble don't last always.'<sup>11</sup>

They were encompassed by a staggering midnight but believed that morning would come. Their positive belief in the dawn was the growing edge of hope that kept the slaves faithful amid the most barren and tragic circumstances. The longing for deliverance and the promised land are the heart of Black Christianity, and when Black Christian people take to the streets in protest, they carry this hope with them at the heart of their struggle.

James H. Cone, a Black Power advocate, rejects any eschatology or apocalypticism in what he terms "Black Theology." The appeal to the next life is a lack of hope. "Black Theology has hope for this life, says Cone. Black Power refuses to embrace any concept which makes the suffering of Black People the will of God, he asserts."

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<sup>11</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength To Love, (New York, 1963), p. 59.

Cone's theology is implied in that what he refers to as Black Theology would insist that genuine biblical faith relates eschatology to history, that is, to what God has done, is doing and will do for his people. Only what God has done and is now doing has any meaning for the future.<sup>12</sup>

#### The Church's Relationship To The Black Power Movement

The Christian Church is the subject of more criticism than commendation by Black Power advocates. There are those who contend that the Church has abdicated its position of leadership and is even more backward today than it was three decades ago. There is still a white Church and a black Church. Instead of being born above race, the Church has been attracted to the world of races and has forgotten the name it bears.

One outstanding fact about the Church is that with some major exceptions, it has aided and abetted the Anglo-Saxon white conspiracy over the years. The words "Whites Only" were never carved over the doors of any white Protestant Church in America; it was understood.

Dr. Robert W. Spike says:

The Christian Church, although involved in every part of the American nation, in its early days, and in the present time, has not influenced its adherents to practice racial justice in housing, education, job opportunity, and often public accommodations. The Christian Church in its own internal life has practiced discrimination, building barriers to prevent open membership in the very household of faith.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Cone, Op. cit., pp. 125-126.

<sup>13</sup>Robert W. Spike, The Freedom Revolution and the Churches, (new York, 1965), pp. 69-70.

In spite of some failures there are achievements by the Christian Church in the Black Power movement that certainly are significant in the field of race relations. It is interesting to note that some of the most rewarding things that have happened in the church are the new stances and activities that have been so soon forgotten, or overlooked entirely. For example: ministers, black and white, demonstrating with their young people for civil rights, church buildings that have been volunteered as centers of operation for groups working for racial justice. While it has been the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People which has played the major organizational role and has taken the giant steps, it is true that much of the leadership has come from within the Church. In situations such as the Montgomery boycott and in many of the sit-in movements, it has been the institutional Church itself that has made the greater contribution. The meetings were held in church houses and were essentially religious meetings. The prayers, the refusal to return evil with evil, the agreement of laymen and ministers to accept imprisonment, the acceptance of economic deprivation, these are activities in which the Church, particularly black, has been, and is playing a vital role in the achievement of justice for all people. Even the more radical element of the Black Power revolution has had considerable resources made available by the Christian Church.

There is within the context of the Black Power movement an increasing number of Black Americans who believe that the destiny of Black people is totally dependent upon the Black Church. Some of them

are calling for a complete break with anything white. Others, who constitute a majority, call for continued relations with whites with a view toward making redemption possible for white people by being a redeemed people ourselves. Some call for violence while others call for non-violence. But it is of theological importance that both groups feel that the Black Church will be the instrument through which God will work for liberation of the black man. They feel that since black people have been a suffering people, they would respond more readily to the call of God to lead the way to a transformed humanity in America.

But there is the danger that the response to the call will not be a true covenanting with God. There are those blacks who seem to infer to God: "if you will deliver us out of our afflictions we will be your people and will serve you." Some blacks have assumed that simply on the basis of being black they are entitled to claim selfish rights before God and to be dealt with in some favored manner that accords with their own notion of what is good for them. The word 'covenant' does not mean a bilateral contract between two equal parties. Quite often one can hear at freedom rallies: "we are going to win because God is on our side!" No doubt this is assumed in every revolution but we will have to merit God's support.

Perhaps we need to be reminded that in the attempt to relate God to some particular aspect of the Black Power movement, it is quite possible to forget that there is something more at stake than the satisfaction of any group or person. First, the group and each person within the group must find completion in One who is greater

than the group or person, that the real basis for brotherhood is our common fallibility before God.

If God has chosen the Black Church in this crisis, it could well be for the purpose of establishing to the Black Church, and to our Nation, something about himself. Because we as Blacks feel that our cause is just, and because we are in the vanguard of the fight for justice, we should not lead anyone to believe that we as an ethnic group are without sin. The important thing to recognize is what God is able to do with sinful Black people as instruments to draw attention to himself and his purposes of redemption. When God chooses people to do his work, it has nothing to do with the intrinsic merit of those he has chosen. The fact that God has summoned the Black Church to do his work in this crisis, as many blacks believe, is not to its credit at all. It has only to do with the Caller, God.

In the history of Israel, they were slaves, maltreated and humiliated. They, too, were chosen and when they asserted their rights, there was trouble and violence. The more they strove to be free, the more Pharaoh and the Egyptian majority caused them to suffer. But Moses, an outside agitator, persisted. Israel won and then lost. As long as the Israelites recognized that God's aid in all their struggles proved nothing about themselves but only proved the supremacy and sovereignty of God, they won. But they lost whenever they believed that their being chosen had been for their own glory. But God had called them to establish his supremacy and not their own. The Black Church should be concerned with the liberation

for the Spirit of man robed in any color and it will be under the judgment of God since God's call will be its concern. It will be a sin if the Church is more concerned with its own cause rather than with God's purposes.

We as Black People, need to surround the whole Black Power movement with God. The whole movement, social, political, economic, must be undergirded by spiritual force if it is to be lasting and productive. The Church can, and must give creative leadership to the Black Power movement in helping Black People realize a higher quality of human life in a world struggling through successive waves of pain, agony, and anguish, a world that is desperately seeking to find a better way than racism, hatred, rejection, despair, and nuclear annihilation. It is my strong belief that there is a sufficient number of strong men who can rise up with holy Black Power and make this nation great. But we should be aware that there are some evils at work within the Black Power struggle that could dim the light of the whole campaign and take away the hope of millions who look to black churchmen for leadership.

As Black People we continue to strive for our freedom. We will still plan for a good life in this country because we are citizens of America. If God will be permitted to guide the Church and indeed if he has chosen the Black Church and Black people for such a time as this, we should believe that America and the world need Black Power. We should also believe that the struggle is not merely an isolated incident, or accident. But God has made us and will guide

us to have a rendezvous with destiny.

So we can dream and our dream, our vision becomes that of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We can sing together, all of us, black and white, Jew and Gentile, Protestant and Catholic, theist and atheist, in a paraphrase of Dr. King's rhetoric:

So let freedom ring. From the rock-ribbed shores of Maine, let freedom ring. From luxuriant forests of Hawaii, let freedom ring. From the lofty Alaskan glaciers, let freedom ring. From every hollow and hill, every valley and mountain, from the panhandle to the prairie, from the steel and glass canyons of Manhattan to the bayous of Louisiana, let freedom ring. We're free at last.<sup>14</sup> Thank God Almighty! We're free at last.

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<sup>14</sup>William L. Eichelberger, op. cit., p. 73.

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